



More action needed to improve early literacy (Guest column)

MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette opinion By **MLive/Kalamazoo Gazette opinion**

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*Matt Gillard is President & CEO of **Michigan's Children**, a statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families.*

*Jane Zehnder-Merrell has been project director for **Kids Count in Michigan**, producing the annual data book on child well-being at the **Michigan League for Public Policy**, since 1994.*

There's a new spotlight on the long-standing problem of third-grade reading proficiency among Michigan schoolchildren. Gov. Rick

Snyder understands we need a well-educated workforce and all children must be literate by the end of third grade. His 2016 budget recommends a comprehensive set of measures to improve early literacy - a key component of academic success and career readiness.

The annual Kids Count in Michigan Data Book closely tracks critical literacy benchmarks. From the Data Book, we know that one-third of Kalamazoo County fourth-graders are not reading proficiently on the state's MEAP test, nor are 43 percent of high school students on the Michigan Merit Exam. The statistics are worse for students of color, from low-income families, and those facing other challenges.

After third grade, literacy skills are essential to acquiring content knowledge necessary for students to move ahead. Those who can't read by then are four times more likely not to graduate high school on time than proficient readers, and will need costly remediation to assist them toward a high school credential and a path to college or a career.

Michigan's Children, the Michigan League for Public Policy and other local and state advocates urge action on policy solutions, many aligning with the governor's recommendations. Snyder's plan recognizes that a child's earliest years - starting at birth - impact academic success. His plan includes parent supports including voluntary family coaching; access to high-quality child care for children from low-income families; and access to literacy-focused



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expanded learning through before- and after-school programs.

More is needed, however.

- The 21st Century Community Learning Centers can target expanded learning opportunities to students who face challenges such as family poverty.
- The state should invest more in *Early On*, which needs to serve many more infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities,.
- Bolstering parents' literacy and education, which affects children's academic success, is essential.

We must address poverty because children who are hungry and homeless struggle to learn. Michigan's child poverty rate is shameful -one in every four children in families with incomes below the poverty line (\$24,000 for a family of four).

Please tell members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to support the governor's budget and the Senate's comprehensive package to improve early literacy.

And take a closer look at Proposal 1 on the May 5 ballot. If the measure fails, lawmakers could shift or deny funding for critical programs and initiatives like early literacy.

A "yes" vote not only fixes how roads are funded but the one penny boost in the state sales tax provides \$1 billion in state revenues and an extra \$300 million for education. The burden on low-income families would be offset by reinstatement of the Earned Income Tax Credit lifting 15,000 families above poverty.

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